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Resourceful Designer Episode 332: You Need A Thick Skin To Be A Designer

You need a lot of things to be a designer. You need creativity. You need to be somewhat artistic. You need technical know how and the ability to learn things and retain things and so much more. But there's one thing the designers need that many people don't talk about, and that's a thick skin. So I figured I'd give it a shot.

I wanna talk about having a thick skin. Now if you're unfamiliar with that term, What having a thick skin means is you are able to accept criticism. In this line of business, there will be times where people will say things to you, about you, about your work, and you need to be able to accept them and move on.

In my 30 plus years as a designer. I've been argued with. I've been yelled at. I've had curses thrown my way. I've even been threatened both of being sued and of personal harm. That last one was when I took a client's website down after he was 6 months behind in his payments. Needless to say, I never worked with him again. But what I'm getting at is, as a designer, there will be times where people won't like what you do.

They won't like your ideas. They won't like your designs. Now most of the time, clients are great. If they don't like something, they'll just Say, no. You know, I don't like that. You know, that's not for me, or could we try something different? But every once in a while, the more clients you work with, You may come across somebody who is how should we put this? A little bit more vocal in their thoughts about you and what you do. And that's why I say that being a designer requires a thick skin. Now if you work for an agency or you work for some company in the design department, then maybe this isn't as important.

Because most of the time, you're not the one dealing with the clients directly. Somebody in management or higher up maybe the ones actually dealing directly with the clients. And when you're an employee, your employer or your boss or manager or whoever it is, even if they're displeased with you, Chances are, they will tell you in a cordial way. Yes. There may be some heated words and some arguments. But it's very different when you're in an employee type situation. But when you run your own business, And you're dealing directly with clients that hire you and are paying you. Those clients are expecting results.

And there could be the possibility that the clients are not happy with what you're presenting them. And as I said, they can get very vocal about it. And that's why I say that designers need a thick skin. You need to be able to let those comments bounce off of you. Move on. Try a different direction. Or in some cases, it may be a situation where it's time to part ways with that client. Now I know when I was very young, I was not a thick skinned child.

I was a very extremely thin skinned Child, meaning, anytime a teacher, my parents, any person of authority would just slightly raise their voice at me. I would break out crying. I mean, I would just bawl my eyes out. And sometimes for really insignificant things, all it took was for somebody to raise their voice, not even yelling, just raise their voice, and the waterworks would just start coming. Now as I got older, my skin thickened for lack of a better term, And I started to learn how to take criticism in the right way. What you have to realize is most of the time, when a client is arguing with you, complaining, criticizing, and all that stuff, It's not directed at you. There's usually something going on in their life or some situation, some stress they're under that is causing this to happen. Now I know it's very difficult when somebody's yelling at you not to take it personally.

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But what you have to remember is, It's all about a design. If somebody doesn't like a design, it can be redone. Anything that's wrong can be fixed. I mean, even if something gets printed, and it's found out after the fact that there was an error on it, and even if the error was your fault. Life goes on. And, yes, tempers may flare, words may be spoken, relationships may even be severed, but life goes on. To be a designer, you need a thick skin. You need to be able to accept criticism as just that, criticism.

When somebody tells me that they don't like a design I did, that's fine. Design is a very subjective medium. Not everybody is gonna like the stuff you Des, or a particular design you did. And all that means is you can go back to the drawing board and try again. Or in some situations, which has happened to me before, At a certain point, you just come to a mutual agreement that maybe you are not the designer for that client. That happened to me just this past year. I was working with a client, and I came up with several designs. She kept wanting me to try something a little different, a little different, try this, try that.

Nothing seemed to work. And after a while, I just told Des. I said, I don't think I'm the right designer for you. I'm obviously not coming up with the imagery that you're imagining even though she had no idea what she wanted. And we parted ways. Now in that case, there was no harsh words spoken. But depending on who the client is, some people, that's just the way they react. They don't like something.

Voices are raised. And as a designer, you have to be able to accept that. And that's why I say this skill is very important, especially if you're running your own design business. Because as I mentioned earlier, these clients have hired you. They expect you to solve their problem. They are paying you for this. And if you are unable to solve it to their satisfaction, They're not gonna be happy. And if you're somebody who cannot accept criticism and just let it roll off you, then maybe running your own design business is not for you.

There are many opportunities for designers out there where you don't have to deal directly with a client, where you can just do the work, and at the end of the day, you're done. There's a lot less stress, a lot less headaches, and yet you still get the satisfaction of creating things. Which after all, isn't that what we wanna do as designers? Just create? But just like anything in the artistic world, There are certain things that will appeal to 1 person and not appeal to somebody else. I've walked through art galleries or art museums and looked at the pieces. And some of them, I just sat there mesmerized at how beautiful and how brilliant they are. And others I look at, and I'm wondering, what is this thing doing here? Why would anybody think this merits to be in a gallery or a museum? But obviously, somebody did. There are design styles out there that I look at and I don't like. There are popular styles that I don't like.

And sometimes, maybe that's what the client wants. If that's the case, I'm not the designer for them. Now, hopefully, we can catch this before any projects actually start. If the client has an idea of what they want, and I realize that's not the type of style I like designing in, then we could put an end to that relationship right there. Maybe I could refer him to somebody else, or I can just wish them the best and let them go find somebody on their own. But if the project does move forward, And at some point, the client is no longer happy, and they decide to take it out on you by arguing, by raising their voices, yelling, even cursing at you. And I hope it never comes to the threats. But if it comes to that, I want you to keep those 2 things in mind.

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1, it's not personal. It's not actually directed at you. They're just frustrated with the outcome of the artwork, and that's okay. And 2, life will go on. You can either come to an agreement with the client or move along, part ways. That's the beauty of the world we live in. We have options. We have opportunities.

And if we're in a situation that isn't feeling good to us because of the way we're being treated, We have the ability to say, I don't wanna be treated like this anymore, and move along. So, yes, designers need a thick skin because inevitably, at some point, somebody will say something about your designs. And even if it's not in a harsh manner, It can be very difficult just to hear from a client something that you've spent hours on and that you think is Perfect. It's a wonderful design. And then the client say, no. They don't like it. To some people, that can be devastating. And even that alone can feel like a blow.

One of the best lessons I ever learned as a designer is that I'm not creating these things for me. I'm creating them for my clients. I want my client to be happy. I don't have to be happy. Yes. I wanna create good design. I wanna create something that works, and I won't present my client with something that I don't think is a good design. But in the end, If the client picks the least favorite option that I present them because it's the one they like the best, then I've succeeded.

If the client is happy, then I should be happy as well, and so should you. So I've grown a thick skin over my life as a designer. And I think it has helped me to look at projects objectively and present things in the best manner to my clients. And if they don't like it, that's on them. That's not on me. So if you are thinking of getting into this design space or thinking of running your own design business, just think about that. Are you able to take criticism? Do you take it personally? Do you get offended when people don't like your work? How thick is your skin? That gauge can help determine how long you'll last in this business, and that's what I wanted to talk about today. Now if you wanna talk about this and so many other topics, just share with me or even just vent about clients and the things they say.

Why don't you join the resourceful designer community? You know, I think one of the best Things that a designer can do is talk to other designers. People who understand them. People that you don't have to Dummy down what you're saying or change the wording so to avoid jargon just so people understand you. Most designers who work for themselves are isolated. They work from home, and they have very few people they can discuss things with. Well, that's what we do in the community. We talk to each other. We communicate with each other either through our Slack group or through our regular video calls.

And one of the Slack channels is actually called client befuddlements, where we share funny stories or weird things that have happened with clients. And let me tell you. It's one of the most fun channels there is in the community. And we also have a rant channel. If you're angry, if you feel abused, if you feel anything with a client, you could go in and rant there, and we will listen, and we will help if that's what you're looking for. Sometimes you just wanna tell people what happened, and it helps in a great big way. So if you're a designer working by yourself and you want other designers you can talk to, Myself and many other great designers, visit [resourceful designer.com/community](https://resourcefuldesigner.com/community) and join today. Until next time, I am Mark Cotes, wishing you all the best with your design business and reminding you to stay creative.